



MONTANA

Libby added to Superfund list

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HELENA — The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency on Tuesday formally agreed to add Libby and surrounding sites contaminated by asbestos to its list of the nation's most toxic environmental sites and flag it as the worst toxic site in Montana.

The step taken Tuesday — publishing an EPA notice in the Federal Register — was a formality that secures a spot for Libby on the EPA's Superfund site after more than two years of debate over how best to clean up toxic asbestos contamination in and around the northwestern Montana town. With the decision by Gov. Judy Martz in December to fire Montana's lone "silver bullet" fast-track authority with the EPA, Libby becomes automatically one of

the nation's top 100 sites in spending and attention priority.

Wendy Thomi, EPA spokeswoman in Helena, said the action will allow EPA to begin Superfund studies and investigations. Clean-up work paid for with federal Superfund money won't start until the site is finalized, likely this summer, but EPA work in and around Libby will continue through then.

EPA scientists and clean-up crews have been working in Libby since late 1999, when newspaper reports linked widespread asbestos poisoning in the community to the defunct W.R. Grace and Co. vermiculite mine. The mine, which shut down in 1990, has been linked to scores of illnesses and nearly 200 deaths.

Since the EPA began cleanup work, W.R. Grace and Co. has declared bank-

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ruptcy and left the state little option but to pursue an EPA Superfund listing. Most Montanans agreed with the proposal, according to a December opinion poll conducted by Lee Newspapers. The survey showed that 90 percent of Montana residents supported Libby's addition to the Superfund list.

Martz at first resisted the listing, saying that the company should be given a chance to rectify its problems. In the end, after months of study, however, the Republican governor decided to follow the EPA's

proposal and called for a fast-track listing.

Thomi said the agency has now opened the proposed listing for 60 days of public comment

and the final step of cementing Libby as a Superfund site likely will happen this summer. Under Superfund law, Montana will foot 10 percent of the total cleanup bill, which will probably cost the state between \$3 million and \$5 million, officials have said.

But there's still one piece of the Libby cleanup puzzle that remains unplaced:

whether the EPA will declare a public health emergency in Libby, paving the way for the agency to remove Zonolite insulation from homes and other buildings there.

W.R. Grace and Co. officials have objected to the proposal and top EPA officials are still weighing the decision, which is expected sometime in the next few weeks.

The public health emergency in Libby could open the floodgates over Zonolite, which has never before been officially called an unsafe product.

Victims' advocate Gayle Benefield of Libby said she was happy with Tuesday's action, but the fight isn't over until the Zonolite issue is put to rest.

"I'm pleased," said Benefield. "It's taken a long time, but I think we're going forward now on this thing."

"We're waiting on the insulation and that's a key factor," she added. "Once we get beyond that, we're going to be in a mode of healing around here."

